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ABSTRACT

A literary communication model cannot adjudicate the conflicting claims of transformation and enculturation: that literature is intrinsically educational, that it conduces to psychic growth as a process, irrespective of subject matter and free from the dangers of indoctrination, but that the imperative to make it instrumental to political ends necessitates stacking the curricular deck. Both the goals of transformation and enculturation can, however, be accommodated by the notion of literature as a dream for awakened minds. What requires resolution is how badly the dream is wanted and how conscious of that dream students are allowed to become, how much educators and parents are willing to risk the way things are in order to let happen the way things might be. Like literacy itself, response to literature is a deeply ambivalent enterprise. Increased attention to how literary texts are experienced and understood will perhaps alleviate the anxiety associated with such ambivalence. Using Alfred North Whitehead's three stages of mastering a discipline--romance, precision, and generalization--brings to mind the politics of engagement as moving literature educators from the first stage of romancing the response to the stage of precision--to confronting the issue of literature's ambiguous explosive power. Students must enjoy reading, to be sure; otherwise they don't read, but they must also be reading epistemologists--at least of their own reading--such that managing their own literary responses becomes one of the basics they move ahead to. (Thirteen references are attached.) (RAE)

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# ROMANCING THE RESPONSE: ISSUES OF ENGAGEMENT AND DETACHMENT IN READING LITERATURE

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It has long been my contention that at the heart of English Studies lies the metaphysics and epistemology of reading and writing, the what and how of the relationship between text and reader and writer. Today, questions pertaining to what comprises literary response, how it works and for what purpose, seem to be increasingly foregrounded in English education. This paper centers on how certain assumptions underlying the nature and function of literary experience — construed in terms of engagement and detachment — impinge on the political dimension of professional practice. The context for my discussion is a critique of the most recent (1987) Ministry of Education Guidelines for English, grades 7-12, for the province of Ontario, a document which, I aver, is prototypical of current thinking about the educational value of literary response.

"Romancing the response", or the epistemology of reading and studying literature in the English class, is now more than ever the hidden curriculum, not just of what English teachers do once they have closed their classroom doors behind them, but of their ability to defend what they do. We are all aware of the crisis of humanism in literary studies, whether it manifests itself in the changing canon (which seems to be going in two directions at once — shrinking because of overt and covert censorship, and expanding because of affirmative action curriculum) or the displacement of literature by composition and media studies. To wit, last June, I, along with several other academics in the field, were invited to address the Ontario Ministry of Education — each of us was expected to speak for no longer than five to seven minutes — on the following three points:

1. The overarching purposes and values of studying literature in school;
2. Examples of controversial* issues that might arise in the course of such study;
3. The identification of strategies/processes that schools and school boards could implement to formulate local policies for addressing such issues.

Given that my entire career has focussed on issues of justification, censorship, and the classroom treatment of literary response, I wonder whether a professor of particle physics would be asked to describe, say, the composition of the blue quark under the same circumstances. But don't get me wrong; I'm at least glad they asked. And, they listened, taking away with them as raw material for a government position paper, intended for school administrators and the general public, depositions from university teachers concerned about the integral relationship between justification and censorship in literature education.

This paper will not attempt to answer the above questions directly. Rather, I will suggest that whatever answers that might be offered are made problematic by the politics of engagement and detachment underwriting received wisdom about what has now come to be called "response to literature", at least as it is understood by a government bureaucracy trying to keep pace with developments in the theory and practice of literature education. The Ontario English Guideline mentioned earlier professes an integrated language arts curriculum, in which the activities of speaking, listening, reading, writing and viewing reinforce each other to produce the articulate and integrated citizen.

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*This word was ultimately changed to "sensitive".

> Students must understand that reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and dramatizing are not subjects in the curriculum, but processes that they use in combination to explore and to extend their abilities to think, to learn, and to communicate. They must understand that processes share prominence in the curriculum with the products of interaction and learning and that the skill and expertise they acquire in carrying out these processes largely determine their success in virtually all school subjects. Thus, in the ideal English or language arts program, students have daily practice in both expressing ideas and interpreting the expressions of others.
>
> Students may read and then discuss their reactions with other students and the teacher. They may write in personal terms about what they read, hear, or view. They may view a movie based on a novel or short story and compare the two media. They may even make their own television documentaries, modelled and samples viewed in class or at home. Activities such as these, in which students experience curriculum integration, help students to mature as learners and to acquire personal tastes in both print and non-print media.(1987, p. 23)

But a close reading of the Guideline unveils some "unintegrated" assumptions about the goals of literary reading as compared with the goals of other aspects of English studies. There is no question that engagement with the text has become the new sacred cow of reading literature in the schools. Literature is no longer a structure to be dissected nor a body of knowledge to be regurgitated on examinations, but a powerful means of furthering psychic growth and communicating values. A rhetorical analysis of Ontario Guideline statements about the educational value of <u>literature</u> as distinct from that of the media, for

example, discloses a certain polarization between the vocabulary of engagement and that of detachment. Both the sections on literature and media literacy include the goals of enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation, but statements on media literacy stand alone in stressing evaluation and the processes of production. As requisites of "visual literacy" (p. 19),

> Students need to understand what the media convey, how they convey it, and the effects of the media and their messages on people's lives. (p. 3)

And

> Media literacy requires basic knowledge of the language of vision. . . . colour, shape, composition, line, light, texture, pattern, framing, movement, and juxtaposition constitute a grammar for understanding and discussing the relative merits of media images. (p. 19, emphasis added)

Here, the educational establishment discloses no anxiety about the potential alienating effects of distancing students from their personal responses to media literature (if we may use that term). It seems that, when it comes to the non-verbal, critical detachment poses no threat to individual enjoyment or psychic growth. What is stressed is the importance of making students "conscious of their viewing habits" and "acquiring skills and knowledge that will assist them in managing their own lives in . . . the information age (p. 19)." In short, the philosophy of response to media aims at instilling a healthy skepticism about the communication model of these images. Students of media studies are to learn to become circumspect about visual images as a transparent medium of self-evident truths or universal values presumed to be transmitted in unmediated form from creator to audience. The Guideline, however, contains no comparable statement on "literary literacy."

This emphasis on critical detachment and the cognitive domain in media literacy is echoed in the section on "Reading", where students must be instructed in the ways of "functional" comprehension: they must be shown how to navigate their way toward meaning (p. 17). Similarly, the section on language study stresses the importance of rhetorical sophistication as a life skill. "English usage is, in part, a matter of recognizing and conforming to the expectations in our society that different forms of language are appropriate in different contexts" (p. 20). Clearly, then, the educational values here are those of critical consciousness — distance, analysis, detachment.

When it comes to reading literature, though, it is as though Matthew Arnold had never died: making one's way through selected texts, it seems, is intrinsically educational. Replacing the language of critical consciousness in the Ontario Guideline is a manifesto of literary engagement, a communication model writ large, one which, if mapped on to the right texts, purports to produce a citizenry with the "right" values, those values being nationalism, pluralism, and humanism. Literary literacy, we find, is quite different from media literacy or functional literacy. It is not something consciously taught for within the context of its own conventions and grammar, but is, rather, a quasi-automatic by-product of personal response to literary works of art, which have "the power to shape thought and understanding" (p. 2). This "power" is presumably empowering to students in a beneficial way simply through their engaging with these texts.

The power to shape thought and understanding thought to be entailed in media other than literature, however, is not regarded as intrinsically benign, and media studies have been created as a way of defending against a power that can undermine critical consciousness. Why is it that in the section titled "The

Centrality of Literature" in the Guideline, a passage comprising only 160 words, the word "power" or its cognates is used four times, as though "power" is not double-edged? We read that if students "learn to appreciate the beauty and the power of the written word, they are likely to become lifelong readers", that "Canadian literature is especially powerful", that the "vicarious experience literature offers is a subtle and powerful force in building the character of a nation and its people" (p. 2). Here, textual power is its own justification.

The foregoing suggests that the ideology of engagement has become educational policy, and that humanist literary values have become mainstream. Some, perhaps most, would say, "At long last!" Isn't this what every apologist for poetry from Sir Philip Sidney to Northrop Frye has been waiting for? Yes, and no. On the one hand, reading for enjoyment, for the furthering of psychic growth, long neglected by the dogmas of New Critical textual positivism, has been legitimated as requisite to developing the appreciation and love of literature. Sidney, Shelley and Frye would have no quarrel with that. On the other hand, the assumption that literature reflects life, the theory of mimetic representation, which undergirds what we have come to think of as engagement with the text, has been challenged by Shelley, Frye, and even Sidney in his postulation of the fictionalized world as a hypothesis ("the poet, he [sic] nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" [1966, p. 52]). Yet the representational nature of literature is accepted uncritically in the Ministry Guideline, a document remarkably progressive in other areas of the language arts. In what appears to be an all-out effort to accommodate the political demands of nationalism and pluralism within the traditional liberal-humanist mandate of literature education, the Ontario document encapsulates the humanist belief that the power of literature can

influence for good but not for ill. This claim, which has been open to question from Plato to contemporary religious fundamentalists, leaves the Ministry position vulnerable to attack from the political left and right, a vulnerability exacerbated by the prevailing primacy (at least in the minds of the most enlightened English teachers) of "the response model". Parents, politicians and educational bureaucrats are beginning to ask, "What is literature for and why should we study it?" Like Socrates, they at least know that they don't know. But they certainly know what they like, and are prepared to fight for its inclusion or exclusion on the curriculum. My contention is that a model of literature education that assumes engagement with the text is the beginning and end of literary education cannot cope with allegations of indoctrination, irrelevance, or redundancy posed by those who would interrogate the effects of the power of literature. It is precisely because literature as engagement is so powerful that it is transformative and subversive to the status quo. English teachers have always known this and are happy about it. Parents are beginning to know it, and some are not happy about it, either because it cannot be measured, or controlled, or both. The literature class as an engagement-container, if you will, is a time-bomb.

Educators justify the place of literature in the curriculum precisely on the presupposition of its transformative power. But change begets change. When parents object to unforeseen consequences of transformation, educators become hoisted on their own humanist petard. To claim power is an educational goal that will go unchallenged by an increasingly conservative public, it seems to me, is simple political naiveté. I am reminded of the passage from Sir Philip Sidney's Defence of Poetry, where, in characterizing the position of those who fear the

harmful effects of poetic power, Sidney uses the analogy of a needle and a sword to illustrate why poetry

> . . . by reason of this sweet charming force, . . . can do more hurt than any other army of words: . . . Truly, a needle cannot do much hurt and as truly (with leave of ladies be it spoken) it cannot do much good: with a sword thou mayst kill thy father and with a sword thou mayst defend the prince and country (p. 55).

I am suggesting that the Ontario English Guideline aims to insure that the literary sword defends the country instead of slaying the father, by appropriating the transformative effects of personal engagement to political purposes, and that it does so through what is essentially a transmission model of literary response. This transmission model reinforces the assumption that literature is a reflection of life with which students identify through personal response to certain truths it conveys, the readers presumably emerging from the literary encounter as better people. But this transformative function devolves on a curiously mechanistic psychology of response and a monolithic conception of the literary work as an artefact that role-models pictures of the world. While it is true that the Guideline enjoins that these pictures of the world must be manifold, rich, and complex (they had better be in a pluralistic society), literature is deemed foundational — not to world citizenship — but primarily to Canadian culture. "Literature is an inspiring record of what men and women have enjoyed or endured, have done, and have dreamed of doing". Students should both be exposed to this record (they must "see men and women in a variety of roles, exhibiting a wide range of human behaviour, abilities, and emotions" [p. 2]) and be open to the vicarious experience literature affords as "a subtle powerful force in building the character of a nation and its people" (p. 2). The overarching empiricism of this rationale is capped in the final sentence, "The creation and

dissemination of Canadian literature can lead to increased understanding among our peoples by establishing a deeper appreciation of one another's experiences" (p. 2).

The Ontario Guideline, then, couches the act of reading literature in the rhetoric of engagement, cultural identity and the psychologizing of aesthetic experience. In the section titled "Reading", for example, the cognitive focus of developing "functional readers" contrasts sharply, embarrassingly so, to my mind, with the foregrounding of precritical response in literary reading:

> Students . . . should read extensively from a wide variety of literature. They should read for understanding and enjoyment and for development of personal tastes. . . . and should begin to develop skills of literary criticism (still based on personal response) that they can use to come to a deeper appreciation of their literary heritage.
>
> Skills in text analysis should develop naturally from the challenge of trying to understand literature and to share that understanding with others. It is in this sense that analysis of literature is part of the English or language arts curriculum in the Intermediate and Senior Divisions. (p. 17)

What, we may respond, can be wrong with such a statement? Isn't this the embodiment of Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) definition of aesthetic reading, in which students are to live through the experience of literature, coupled with Northrop Frye's ideal of the educated imagination (1963a), in which direct, participating response interpenetrates with critical analysis? Again, yes and no. It is certainly Rosenblattian in its emphasis on aesthetic experience as instrumental to individual psychic growth, a concept articulated earlier in the Guideline through a self-expressive theory of art. Here we find that "[A]rtistic expression involves the clarification and restructuring of personal perception and experience", and that by personal response and the sharing of "thought, ideas, and feelings... students clarify and restructure their own experiences with, and perception of,

artistic endeavour and, in the process, develop unique personal responses to the arts" (p. 6).

While the foregoing is laudatory inasmuch as it represents an advance over the unengaged atomization of literary works many English teachers have been weaned on and have developed a revulsion to, consigning aesthetic experience to the domain of the emotive self-expressive is to denigrate the importance of critical judgment in literary education. While the Ontario Guideline rightly makes the determination that, psychologically, analysis or detachment should follow engagement ("the skills of literary criticism [should be] based on personal response"), Frye's theory of the educated imagination espouses the logical superiority of detachment over engagement. Though Frye has often been quoted in Ontario Ministry Guidelines to support its liberal/humanist/pluralist mandate, what is not normally acknowledged are his affinities with critical pedagogy theorists, who share with him suspicion of the cult of beauty (see 1970, pp. 58-59) in terms of its threat to heightened awareness. I will briefly elaborate on these principles below.

Though, for Frye, literature is a form of secular scripture, in reading it the exegetical or critical function supersedes the liturgical, engaged or participatory one: literature, then, must be understood as well as undergone. (Cf. Moffett, 1988a, p. 182). Frye valorizes a "scholarship of the eye", the visual clarity of critical consciousness (1965, p. 22), which is, in his view, lowered and debased by a fully engaged response (1963b, p. 123). For him, as for Plato, art must be "a dream for awakened minds" (Frye, 1957, p. 111, emphasis added). Consciousness is all, and must not be risked for "the gambling machine of an ideal [literary] experience" (1976, p. 29). A price Frye has been willing to pay for

consciousness is attenuation of intensity in literary experience. The engaged reader, untidy and unpredictable, is amenable to, indeed embraces, the admixture of personal experience with the literary object unleashed by the recursive processing of text. For Frye, the engaged reader meanders; the "real" reader, on the other hand, "knows that he [sic] is entering into a coherent structure of experience, and the criticism which studies literature through its organizing patterns of convention, genre, and archetype enables him [sic] to see what that structure is" (1971, p. 29).

The dialectic of alternating states of engagement with the text and detachment from it I have called *the aesthetics of total form*. This dialectic can be practised with a plurality of literary critical approaches and can begin anywhere students happen to be, both in their own psychic development and their own individual canon. Integration of personal response with critical methods should be individualized and developmental. To what degree it should be structured or sequential is a problem to be worked out once it is acknowledged that a pedagogy of detachment needs to complement that of engagement. That time is rapidly approaching. If parental objections to the educational power of literature under a response/communication/transmission model necessitates a day-long think tank at the Ontario Ministry of Education to sort out issues of justification and censorship, then we are, like it or not, confronted with the politics of the engaged reader — a realization which has informed the writing of James Moffett's recent book on censorship (1988b).

No longer can literature educators rationalize the educational value of literature through the arguments of engagement or detachment according to political expediency. No longer can they blithely justify a nationalistic content,

multi-cultural values, or revisionist images of women by means of a pedagogy of engagement, on the one hand, with its aims of attitude formation and identity building through vicarious experience; and, on the other, refute censors and religious fundamentalists by taking refuge in a pedagogy of detachment, by way of a different agenda of aesthetic distance, historical context, symbolic interpretation, or hypothetical statement.

A literary communication model (see Lokke, 1987) cannot adjudicate the conflicting claims of transformation and enculturation: that literature is intrinsically educational, that it conduces to psychic growth as a process, irrespective of subject matter and free from the dangers of indoctrination, but that the imperative to make it instrumental to political ends necessitates stacking the curricular deck. Both the goals of transformation and enculturation can, however, be accommodated by the notion of literature as a dream for awakened minds. What requires resolution is how badly we want the dream and how conscious of that dream we allow students to become, how much, as educators and parents, we are willing to risk of the way things are in order to let happen the way things might be. Like literacy itself, response to literature is a deeply ambivalent enterprise. Increased attention to how literary texts are undergone and understood will perhaps alleviate the anxiety associated with such ambivalence. Using Alfred North Whitehead's (1976) three stages of mastering a discipline — romance, precision, and generalization — we might think of the politics of engagement as moving literature educators (some even kicking and screaming) from the first stage of romancing the response to the stage of precision, where they confront the issue of its ambiguous explosive power. Students must enjoy reading, to be sure; otherwise they don't read. But they

must also be reading epistemologists — at least of their own reading — such that managing their literary responses becomes one of the basics we move ahead to.

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